

## An exclusive peek inside a prison like no other

2/17/2014 By Kevin Caufield, Staff Writer

SHERIDAN —

The thick steel door clicked loudly as an imposing black man approached from the other side. He's more than 6 feet tall and weighs well over 300 pounds.

But instead of a professional football uniform, he's wearing the

traditional prison blue shirt and pants attire common for inmates inside Sheridan Correctional Center.

**The NewsTribune took a tour of the Sheridan prison and learned what makes it a standout in the correctional community.**



**WestCare counselor Edward Buckley conducts a group therapy session with inmates inside Sheridan Correctional Center. In this photo, Buckley is teaching inmates about how to properly and respectfully handle differences with other people. NewsTribune photos/Scott Anderson**

"Welcome to the 'House of Ambition' where miracles happen," says the inmate, who then introduces himself as Cerriado Walton as he opens the door.

Surrounded by open farmland and next to the small rural Illinois town of Sheridan is a prison unlike any other.

It's a facility solely dedicated to going beyond the Illinois Department of Corrections mandate to safely incarcerate people who have broken laws.

At Sheridan, the goal is to also keep society safe by preparing offenders to live drug-free and crime-free once they reach the outside.

IDOC contracts with WestCare Foundation, which implements a therapeutic model approach to rehabilitate offenders who have committed substance abuse-related crimes.

Sheridan inmates participate with counselors in daily substance abuse treatment groups, anger and life skill management programs. They also learn employable skills, get an education and are given resources to succeed on the outside after they've served their sentences.

Very little of an inmate's time at Sheridan involves being locked inside a cramped jail cell.

### **Orientation**

Take Walton for example. He is serving as the expediter in Building C-25 Unit A. Every unit throughout the 2,000-inmate prison has an expediter whose job is to greet people as they enter the unit and to see to anyone's specific needs within the hall of holding cells.

The rest of the offenders in the "House of Ambition" sit together in the common room between their cells holding workbooks and listening as counselor Edward Buckley taught them strategies about proper conflict resolution.

C-25 is the building dedicated to orientating new Sheridan inmates to the prison's unique culture. Not only will they begin their individual therapeutic programming for substance abuse and mental health issues, they also learn what will be expected of them during their time at the facility, said WestCare clinical supervisor Lauren Holt.

"We show them how the encounter group process works, teach them appropriate communication and listening skills, and they learn how to handle themselves without fighting," Holt said. "We're teaching them the process, which they can take with them on the outside."

Walton was convicted in Cook County on two counts of vehicular hijacking, three counts of robbery and two counts of possession of a controlled substance. He did the first part of his time at Vandalia Correctional Center before being transferred to Sheridan. *(Story continues on next page)*

"I've learned a lot from these counselors," he said. "I'm a problem solver and I learned how to stop using drugs. It's going to be a battle when I get out, but I know how to win."

Walton is currently learning culinary arts at Sheridan and already has earned his sanitation license. He is scheduled to be released in March of 2015.

"I have to stay clean and sober when I get out," he said. "I want to utilize my culinary skills and open my own restaurant."

### **Treatment and work life**

After inmates complete the orientation process they are placed into smaller groups into different buildings such as C-19. The wings here hold about 24 inmates which allows for closer group therapy sessions.

WestCare clinical supervisor Rachel Lindley said this is where offenders participate in cognitive behavioral therapy such as learning how to better use their free time.

"A lot of these guys get into trouble on the outside because they don't have anything else to do," she said. "So what we are doing today is going through mock scenarios they might encounter on the outside and develop strategies on how to make the right choices."

Inmates spend most of their time outside of their cells doing something positive for what is known as "the treatment community." That may include serving as an expeditor, running errands between buildings, or participating in programs.

Another aspect is job training. Sheridan offers a long list of different career programs that include skilled trades, horticulture and computer numerical control technology.

Aaron Williams was convicted of aggravated domestic battery and burglary charges. He is serving 12 years, but is expected to be paroled in March, 2016.

He works the textile cutting machine which cuts all of the cloth that will eventually be turned into prison garments for the entire IDOC prison system.

He works 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. every day earning \$1 per hour or about \$140 per month. Not much, he admits, but it's not about the money.

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"Yeah, you learn a trade but more important is you learn a sense of responsibility," Williams said. "A lot of guys come in here and have never worked a day in their life. They don't know how. But here, we learn that."

### **'The House of Achievers'**

The last step in the process is in C-26. The building is solely dedicated to inmates with less than a year left on their sentence. It's also one of the most crucial points in Sheridan's therapeutic model.

"This is where you man up and learn how to live each day outside of prison," said Westcare assistant director John Zidek.

Group therapy meetings continue here but under a different program called Treatment Alternative for Safe Communities. The goal is to assist inmates in identifying and progressing through stages of change, assessing their strengths, needs, abilities and preferences for life on the outside.

In the circle, inmates talk with counselors about the issues they may face upon release and how to overcome them. Topics often include what to do if they reconnect with old friends who want them to commit a crime such as robbing a house or doing drugs. Another topic may include how to cope with being turned down for a job.

Inmates also will be directed to service organizations on the outside that can further assist them with substance abuse or general life problems.

A John Howard Association report on Sheridan's program identified its family reunification program as "inspiring." The program helps inmates and their immediate family members address issues of substance abuse and aims to mend any broken relationships prior to release. There's also a special visitation building and additional visitation time for inmates nearing the end of their sentences for this purpose.

Darius Harris was convicted in late 2010 of aggravated driving under the influence in Cook County. It was his third drunken driving conviction garnering him a sentence of 9 years.

Harris said he's already met with his family through the reunification program and they are in support of the changes he's made, and will make when he is paroled in October.

"This has been a positive experience," he said. "I've learned a lot about my negative behaviors such as drinking and driving and I know now to think of my family first."  
*(Story continued on next page)*

Sometimes inmates at Sheridan are allowed to express their artistic talents. Throughout the facility inmates have painted positive messages or murals depicting that particular unit's house name or inspirational quotes.

The mural inside C-26 Unit B is a massive painting of a tree. At the top stretches a banner with the unit's name "House of Achievers" and a tree full of healthy leaves. Each leaf has words such as "love," "hope," and "faith" inscribed on them.

At the bottom of the painting are dead leaves with words such as "denial," "relapse," and "anger," completing the pictorial of the change that takes place within Sheridan inmates.

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## **Sheridan prison experiment working**

**By Kevin Caufield**  
**NewsTribune Reporter**

SHERIDAN — An experiment in Illinois prison corrections is proving its worth.

Ten years ago, Sheridan Correctional Center was reopened as a national experiment in how best to reduce recidivism — when an ex-offender relapses into crime.

Today, the program is working so well that other corrections departments across the nation are beginning to take notice.

"An offender has to have the skills to successfully reintegrate into society," said IDOC spokesman Tom Shaer. "We believe we have developed a process that does that."

In the last two years, ex-offender recidivism rates throughout the IDOC prison system have dropped from 55 percent to 47 percent. That's in large part due to Sheridan where recidivism rates of its ex-offenders are 20 percent lower than typical IDOC ex-offenders.

Sheridan was reopened on Jan. 2, 2004, to combat recidivism by requiring its inmates to undergo extensive substance abuse treatment using a "therapeutic community" technique to equip offenders with the education and life skills they need to return to drug-free and crime-free lives upon release.

The result is not the kind of prison you see on television. Inmates greet everyone at the door of their building units while others participate in group therapy sessions led by contracted counselors who teach them how to prepare for and successfully live life on the outside.

Offenders there are always busy and follow a strict routine. Half of their day is spent in group therapy sessions. Another large portion is spent at work learning a trade or in school. And each is offered plenty of yard time.

But the prison is not without its problems. A \$50 million budget still doesn't leave enough money to make all of the needed infrastructure repairs. And overcrowding throughout IDOC has forced Sheridan to accept the spillover.

Sheridan only accepts inmates who are within a few years of completing their sentences and have been convicted of crimes where substance abuse was a factor.

But a 2011 John Howard Association report on Sheridan found that due to overcrowding IDOC is not properly screening inmates that are best suited for Sheridan's unique treatment program.

Instead, more and more inmates entering the facility have serious psychiatric illnesses, are violent offenders or generally hostile in response to substance abuse treatment.

Sheridan warden Marcus Hardy said those issues are being addressed. He said IDOC has avenues for the prison to acquire money if major structural repairs are ever needed.

Additionally, Hardy said the prison separates the population of offenders who do not qualify for Sheridan's unique treatment program.

The future of Sheridan will depend on the demographics of offenders. But as more and more people commit substance abuse-related crimes, Hardy said the need for prisons like Sheridan will grow.

"We set offenders up so that there is no reason for them to fail unless they choose to," Hardy said. "That is why this model needs to be duplicated across the country. It works."

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